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### Control, Learning, and Resistance

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# Control, Learning, and Resistance

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**Abstract:** *This paper argues that learning can be a tool for social and political change. It proposes a theoretical framework for educators and learners living out part or all of their lives in struggle. And it examines a moral dilemma for educators who see learning as indivisible from action.*

## Social Control

We are all of us subject to social control, be it control by custom and convention, legislation, the courts, publicity, technology, our friends or the schoolyard bully. In a middle-class family in a developed country like Australia, for example, the children are kept in line by the parents, who use subtle and not so subtle forms of control ranging from personal example to persuasion to sanctions to physical restraint that may border on violence. The parents in their turn are kept in line by the legal, social and moral responsibilities that come with having children and by the emotional, physical and economic demands made by the children themselves.

For the purposes of this paper I want to identify and discuss three interrelated forms of social control – physical force, institutional control and control by ideas. By singling these out and examining the ways they “fold over” into each other, we can begin to understand how we are severely constrained in various aspects of our lives, and how we can be made to behave in particular ways.

People are controlled by physical force. We are pushed around, and we can push others around. We take a child by her shoulders and shake her. There is domestic violence and rape. A street gang menaces us. We lock up boat people. An oligarchy employs torture, and murder by roving hit squads. One country invades another. In a sense, physical force is easy to identify, and easy to understand. But social control by physical force rarely occurs spontaneously. Behind most manifestations of physical force is an organisation – a ministry of health, political party or corporation, a family, that street gang, the tactical response group of the police, a government ... In these cases, physical force is an expression of institutional control.

Institutional control encompasses both coercion and consent. All of us submit to institutional con-

trol, and in many cases do so willingly. We give up a range of freedoms in exchange for the membership, services and security those institutions provide. We abide by the rules of the local sports club in order to use the club’s facilities. We run with a gang in return for a sense of belonging. We meet the requirements of our employment in return for a wage or a salary. We follow the educational paths set by schools, colleges and universities in return for qualifications. We submit to the laws of the land in return for the services and security the government and bureaucracies provide us. Institutional control is everywhere.

Physical force and institutional control are intimately related. Some institutions, such as the penal system, a health department and the education system, make overt use of physical force in the form of detention and incarceration. They lock people up. Other institutions make use of the threat of physical force. We keep up our re-payments to the bank for the loan on a house out of a justified fear that we will be evicted if we do not. Physical force in actuality or in the form of menace underpins many social relationships. And since social relationships are formalised in institutions, such as the family, the club and the workplace, we can argue, as Foucault (1973) does, that institutions are structured embodiments of physical force.

The third kind of social control is control by ideas. Just as physical force and institutional control fold over into one another, so control by ideas folds over into institutional control. Institutions are made up of groupings of people, procedures, and property. But they are also constructed on sets of values and ideologies, which those institutions espouse, promote, and in some cases seek to make ascendant. If a social class or group succeeds in making its ideas and values the dominant ones in society then that class or group achieves hegemonic control. Its ideas become embedded in institutions, such as

public utilities, private corporations, the churches and the education system, which form part of the superstructure of the state. The ideas and values become uncontested, accepted as common sense and therefore in need of neither justification nor explanation. In this form of social control, the majority accepts as normal what is in the interests of a minority. Control is achieved not through coercion but by consent (Gramsci, 1971). If developers can get people who are living in the path of a proposed freeway to say: "You can't stand in the way of progress", then they do not need the courts or the police to move the occupants out of their houses. The occupants will move of their own accord.

### **Learning**

As adult educators we have a role in helping ourselves and others learn about social control, and about the strategies we can use to combat unwanted expressions of that control. If we accept this role, we are using learning as a tool in social and political struggle.

The three kinds of social control tie in with the "tripartitions" that recur in critical theory. Habermas, for example, examines human interaction in terms of subject-object, subject-subject, and subject-to-itself; identifies the modern value spheres of science, ethics and self-expression; and distinguishes between the objective, social and subjective worlds (Dallmayr, 1996). To identify the kinds of learning we might pit against different kinds of social control, it makes sense to go to adult educators like Mezirow (1991) and Welton, (1995) who draw on critical theory. These adult educators have interpreted Habermas' (1972) discussion of "knowledge constitutive interests" and promoted what we can now call "a critical theory of adult learning." In keeping with Habermas' tripartitions, this theory postulates three domains of learning—instrumental, interpretive, and critical.

Instrumental learning enables us to control our environment, to do a job, to move and build things, and to manage people when we think of them as functions and part of the physical world. In this domain we learn about cause and effect, and solve problems by commonplace logic. As adult educators working in this domain, we will help ourselves and our learners acquire skills and information to deal with practical matters and to use material structures and systems to resist or bring about change. In the objective world, in the value sphere

of science, in our subject-to-object relations, we will pit instrumental learning against physical forms of control.

Interpretive learning helps us understand the human condition. It is the learning that focuses on what people are and how they relate, on symbolic interaction and the social construction of meaning. In this domain we solve problems through discourse, through reflection and insight, and by seeking consensus. As adult educators working in this domain, we will help ourselves and our learners understand the way people construct institutions, and how they communicate and give meaning to their social lives. We will help ourselves and our learners use these understandings to resist or bring about change. In the social world, in the value sphere of ethics, in our subject-to-subject relationships, we will pit interpretive learning against institutional control.

Critical learning helps us identify the assumptions and values that constrain the way we think, feel and act. It helps us understand what "makes us tick." It helps us strive for a meta-awareness in which we are not only more acutely aware of ourselves and of the world around us, we become aware of our awareness. In this domain we address problems by adopting a form of self-reflection which may transform our ways of thinking, feeling and acting, and so may transform our being. Critical learning is a political act. It helps us see through ourselves and so become better at seeing through others. It helps us separate out "truth" from "ideology," and understand how our social, cultural and political contexts have shaped our thinking. It helps us understand how others may try to shape our thinking for us, and so makes us much less easily fooled. In the subjective world of ideas and belief, in the value sphere of self-expression, in our subject-to-itself relation, we will pit critical learning against hegemonic control.

Most manifestations of social control will be a mix of coercion, different kinds of institutional authority, and various attempts to influence people's thinking. Learning in opposition to unwanted social control in its turn will be a mix of the instrumental, interpretive and critical. But the framework I have presented allows us to make choices about the kinds of educational response we might make. So, when the police charge picketing workers during a lawful strike (as they did recently at Pilbara in Australia), in the immediate aftermath of the charge

the union educator will want to help the picketers learn how best to protect themselves from the batons, and how to form more effective human barriers. With a little more time in hand, the educator will want to provide information on workers' rights in case of arrest, and instruction and practice in the skills needed to organise and insist on those rights. And only when there is ample time and no threat of imminent attack will the educator and picketers be able to discuss how they might change the values of a society which espouses the principle of fairness yet employs the police to attack ordinary working people.

### Action

Learning of the kind I am discussing is bound up in action, and the educator (when one is identifiable) is an activist. The educator in the example above is a member of the union and acting in solidarity with the picketers. The coordinator of a women's refuge working with victims of domestic abuse will identify with the women, may have experienced domestic abuse herself, and will be anything but neutral in the kinds of learning she encourages. These adult educators not only help people learn from their experience. They help them decide on action. To the framework of social control and learning, therefore, I want to add a taxonomy of action, upon which the educator can draw in the design and provision of learning, and which she or he can offer to the learners.

McAllister (1992) and Dalton (1996) talk of "participation" in the affairs of the state, and use terms such as "conventional" and "unconventional" participation, and "legal," "semi-legal," and "radical protest." I am drawing on their ideas but will collapse their different forms of participation and protest into three kinds of action; and call them "conventional," "confrontational," and "violent" action.

Conventional action enables us to participate directly and peaceably in the affairs of our community, society and state. It involves activities such as voting, taking part in election campaigns as party members or campaign workers, entering into communal activity, making contact with politicians and officials through letter-writing, email, phone and meetings, organising petitions and lobbying, and engaging in consumer boycotts, lawful demonstrations and lawful strikes. In this kind of action the people involved are intent on changing policy and

procedures within the existing structures, and not with altering the structures themselves. Middle-class people might take to the streets to protest government changes to the public education system, but they are not challenging the existing order, of which in many other respects they are a part. Indeed these kinds of modern demonstration are often carefully managed, with people being bussed to pre-arranged meeting points and kept in order by marshals provided by the protesting organisations themselves (Dalton, 1996, p. 68).

Confrontational action is what it says. It takes on those in control more openly and directly, and is more "in your face." It will involve action designed to disrupt, such as invading a meeting, blockading a road, holding demonstrations which have *not* been coordinated with the police and the local council, occupying buildings, and going ahead with a strike that has been decreed unlawful by the authorities. So environmental activists, for example, will picket a uranium mine, block an underwater outlet from a chemical works, and dump waste outside a company headquarters. In many countries people involved in confrontational action tread a fine line between action which will result in prosecution and action which, although technically illegal, will not be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Activists may occupy a building not knowing whether the police will arrest or simply eject them.

Violent action involves damage to property and violence against people. So the students or workers in some countries take to the streets, and literally do battle with the police or armed services. Taking such action involves flagrantly breaking the law, or confronting authorities who will offer little leniency if the activists are detained. Taking such action is physically dangerous, and involves stepping across both legal and moral boundaries.

The three kinds of action I have described correlate loosely with Harbermas' tripartitions. We can see that violent action in its simplest form relates to the physical and objective worlds. Successful confrontational action is premised on an understanding of institutions and their procedures and so relates to some significant extent to the social world. Conventional action is commonly aimed at changing the thinking of people and effecting changes in policy, and so relates to the world of ideas, and underlying values and assumptions. A framework made up of forms of social control, forms of learning and forms of action emerges to which the activist adult edu-

cator can refer in the process of responding to the needs and interests of learners involved in struggle.

### Moral Responsibility

I have left the moral problem to the end. Can we really envisage helping learners plan for and engage in violent action? Violence against people is repugnant. Yet violence occurs. Thugs, militias and government forces wage campaigns of terror in Timor, Kosovo, and Chechnya. People are exploited, some killed or maimed, in countries where there is little legal protection in the workplace. A gay person is bashed on a city street. A child is abused behind the closed doors of a suburban house. It would seem a denial of our own morality not to consider every possible form of response.

An activist friend talked about how, in a particular district of a particular country, it was virtually accepted practice that the owner of a clothing factory and his sons raped women in their workforce. "Why," he asked "when there is violence against us it is all right, but when we consider violence in return we are condemned?" Earlier I asked why the police at Pilbara used force in support of employers and abandoned their responsibility to protect the workers. During a campaign against the closure of a factory in the US, a union activist exclaimed: "There must be a way to get the National Guard on *our* side!" (California Newsreel, 1978).

Is it not possible to use violence in the interests of good? This was the challenge issued by Nelson Mandela in 1964 at the Rivonia trial when he explained to his prosecutors how he and his supporters had moved from lawful protest to sabotage in their struggle against the apartheid policy of white South Africa (Mandela, 1994). Speculation about violence is not out of place in the world of the adult educator. We already teach violence. In some conventional adult education institutions there are courses in self-defence which teach aggressive responses to even the hint of an attack.

I have no easy answer to this collection of challenges. However, I argue that we need to ask questions, point to precedents, and tell stories. Horton talked of encounters with hired killers, of the murder of a union activist friend, and of helping a group of strikers decide whether or not they would kill the killers (1990). Foley tells of activists who, in an otherwise non-violent anti-logging campaign, broke ranks and took action in a way that endangered the

lives of the loggers. The actions of these mavericks swung the campaign in the environmentalists' favour (Foley, 1991). In a recent book I recount the story of a friend who used educational and industrial action to combat the use of child labour. At a crucial moment, when the release of a number of children from their virtual slavery was under threat, my friend's comrades kidnapped the employer's son. They used the child as a bargaining counter to get the campaign back on track (Newman, 1999).

By asking questions, identifying precedents and telling stories we can provide activist learners with a store of discussion, examples, and other people's experiences to draw upon. We can help them do their thinking beforehand. By presenting them with the framework of social control, learning and action, we can offer them choices. And because these choices extend to and include violent action, we will be confronting them and ourselves with an ethical dilemma. We will be adding a profoundly moral element to our teaching and learning.

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